Sunfish

They're easy to catch, fun to watch, and yummy to eat

By Colleen Welch

With the arrival of spring, the sun is higher in the sky and its warmth invites us out to play and to fish. Many of New Mexico's waters are home to three sunfish—green sunfish, bluegill, and longear sunfish. Sometimes they are called “panfish” because they are small and easily fit in a frying pan. Sunfish are easy to catch, make great campfire eating, and are really fun to watch in clear waters along shorelines.

Sunfish are kind of like China dishes shimmering in clear pools of water and along reservoir shorelines. Springtime is one of the best seasons to watch these colorful fish as they crowd into the sandy bottoms. Wild excitement to make nests. Sunfish are plentiful in many of New Mexico’s reservoirs, Try Santa Rosa Lake in central New Mexico, Elephant Butte in the southwest, or Bosque Redondo at Fort Sumner near the eastern grasslands. Be sure to check the New Mexico Fishing Rules and Information Booklet for fishing rules. Booklets are available at sporting goods stores and on the Department of Game and Fish website, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Look on page 16 for a list of “youth-only” waters where only kids under age 12 can fish.

Hungry little sunfish are almost always eager to bite your hook and bring a smile to your face. Look for them in the state’s warmwater lakes and ponds.

Learn to fish

You may live in a town or state park
But you should know how to

By Dan Williams

New Mexico’s diversity of wildlife and terrain present vast opportunities for people seeking a springtime outing. Hunters look forward to spring turkey season while anglers happily anticipate ice-off and hot fishing for hungry trout, spawning bass and walleye. Photographers, bird-watchers and treasure-seekers find special thrills in spring migrations and shed antlers. "It’s always exciting when you walk up on an antler, especially if it’s a big one," said Brian Novosak, southeastern New Mexico game manager for the Department of Game and Fish. "Hunting sheds is like hunting elk. They are where you find them." Antler hunting has grown in popularity as New Mexico’s elk herds continue to earn the reputation as some of the healthiest in the nation. Along with bird-watching, it is among the fastest-growing wildlife-related recreational activities in the state. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, almost 400,000 people regularly participate in away-from-home, non-hunting, non-angling wildlife-
game&fish news

Judge hands Gila outfitters heavy fines

Two outfitters and a guide from the Reserve area will pay more than $7,000 in fines for violating special-use regulations while guiding or guiding in the Gila National Forest.

U.S. Magistrate William P. Lynch sentenced the three men on charges resulting from a joint investigation by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the Gila National Forest. Violations included non-compliance with federal and state special-use permit requirements for commercial guiding of wildlife.

Defendants and fines included:
- Michael DeLaO, 29, Gila and Apache Outfitter Guide Service, pleaded guilty to non-compliance with Federal and Gila National Forest special-use permits and use of an unauthorized guide. He was fined $3,220.
- Jamie DeLaO, 34, Hard Core Outfitter/ Guide Service, pleaded guilty to non-compliance with the Gila National Forest special-use permits and use of an unauthorized guide. He was fined $3,000.
- Carlos DeLaO, 36, pleaded guilty to operation of a commercial business on U.S. Forest lands without a special-use permit, and use of an unauthorized guide. He was fined $3,220.

Forest Service Patrol Captain Steve Partridge of the Department of Game and Fish/Reserve District Wildlife Supervisor Leon Redman stressed that this case demonstrates the commitment from both agencies to work together to enforce state and federal laws affecting outfitters and guides.

“Individuals holding a Forest Service special-use permit, whether for guiding or guide-aided or other permitted activity, need to be aware of the regulations and the New Mexico outfitter’s guide requirements to prevent a similar situation from occurring,” Edwards said.

Learn to shoot, fish and more at sixth annual Outdoor Expo

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conservation officers stress safety as those who begin to embrace the basics of muzzleloader shooting at the New Mexico Outdoor Expo.

By Dan Williams

If you’re among the growing number of people who got excited about antler hunting in New Mexico, you should skip the math. It could keep you up at night.

The statewide elk population now stands between 70,000 and 90,000, according to the latest Department of Game and Fish estimates. Based on surveys and hunter reports, about one-third of those elk are bulls. That means somewhere around 60,000 antlers hit the ground each year. Finding antlers can be challenging for even experienced hunters. They are typically distributed randomly in rough country, usually far enough away from trails to hinder access. Even the competition — shed hunters and rodents that like to snack on the calcium in elk antlers — are to blame.

“Going back 25 years, we’re seeing an increase each year in shed-hunting activity,” said Kevin Rodden, the Department of Game and Fish elk management specialist for the Southwest Area, which includes the Gila National Forest. “One reason is the price of antlers. And, of course, the Gila is known for its big bulls.”

To a shed hunter, a good find is more than just a pretty bone. Guided by a dis- carded weapon, it can symbolize a lot of power. A large antler feels good in the hands — rough and knobby, yet smooth to touch. Finding one is always a thrill. Many hunters can’t resist the temptation to keep their prizes, sometimes just to decorate the garden or hang on the fence. Others sell them to entrepreneurs who use antlers in a number of ways. Prices vary widely across a range from $61 for a piece of horn, to $7 or more for fresh sheds and almost any size.

Anglers make good lamps and chandeliers, handles for keys and doors, racks for hats, coats and guns. Smeared carvings turn up on boats and sunflower models as a flood supplement to promote overall health and stamina. A market of shed hunters can mean big bucks for taxidermists. Mounted with a nice cape, antler sheds can be used as handles for knives and doors, racks for hats and guns, even as a deadfall to scare birds from a lodge, restaurant or cabin owner looking for peace.

“A really nice set can sell for several thousand dollars,” Rodden said. “Everybody out there is looking for that big bull that scores 370 to 400.”

Elk sheds their antlers every year, usually from mid-March into early April. Deer tend to lose their antlers closer to fall, but sometimes just a bit later when they are shedding depends upon the animal. Bulls tend to lose their antlers the earliest. If you’re serious about finding sheds, find out where elk and deer spend the winter — and most important, find out where elk and deer usually shed antlers.

“Elk antlers usually are a little easier to find because they don’t travel far, so when you find an antler, there usually are more around,” said Brian Novosak, the Downriver Ranch for the Southwest Area, which includes the Gila National Forest.

“Deer antlers are harder to find, mainly because the deer tend to be more evenly distributed. They go on a drive 2.6 miles to the range. Drive I-40 west to the top of nine-tenths mile, exit 170, take I-40 west to the top of nine-tenths mile. Exit 170, drive 2.6 miles to the range.”

Department game managers and conservation officers offered some advice for novice antler hunters.

Gila country

“Our elk herd is doing fantastic right now,” Rodden said. He suggested looking for antlers in Game Management Unit 15 between Reserve and Quemado, or Unit 16 north of Silver City. Unit 16 includes the Gila Wilderness and the Black Range, areas known for large elk populations.

Rodden said the best places to look for sheds are "typically the nastiest, roughest country.

"He advises walking back ridgetops to find where the elk were wintering. Some good areas include Elk Mountain, Bear Wallow and Eagle Peak. But the average shed hunter will have it pretty tough.

Sacramento Mountains

One of the state’s most productive elk herds is in the Sacramento Mountains of southeast New Mexico near Cloudcroft and Ruidoso. Novosak said the best chances of finding a really big shed in Unit 36 north of Ruidoso, an area managed for trophy elk. Unit 34 near Cloudcroft also has been a good hunting potential because it contains large numbers of elk.

Most of Units 34 and 36 are on National Forest land, which makes shed hunting easier. Novosak suggested searching mountains, meadows and ridges in higher elevations. "Low-lying New Mexico elk use the vegetation from the bottom to the top. But these sheds can be heavy. "There's a competition — from other shed hunters — to spot because they blend into the terrain.

The east side of the Valle is closed Jan. 31 through March 31 as crucially for sheds. The west side of the Valle is open year-round. The west side is closed May 1 through June 31 to protect calving elk.

Other northeastern areas to try include public lands and state parks. With few exceptions, antler hunting is prohibited on New Mexico state parks, national parks, monuments, wildlife and wardenless preserves, and Na- tional Monuments. Turks Thumb: Always check with the landowner or controlling agency before you go antler hunting.

Know the shed-hunting rules

Where to hunt legally: Antler hunting is allowed on U.S. Forest Service Bureau and New Mexico State land: government property throughout New Mexico.

Private land: Antler hunters must have oral permission from the landowner.

No hunting allowed: With few exceptions, antler hunting is prohibited on New Mexico state parks, national parks, monuments, wildlife and wardenless preserves, and National Monuments. Turks Thumb: Always check with the landowner or controlling agency before you go antler hunting.

Commercial antler hunting: Permits and fees may be applied. Be sure to check with the controlling agency or landowner before collecting antlers for personal use.

Antlers and skull: It is legal to possess naturally shed antlers. Skulls, however, are state property and must be purchased from the state. If you find a skull or any protected wild animal, with or without antlers, it must be. It is legal to keep antlers in the field and take them with you. Antlers are not illegal under any circumstances.

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Northern mountains

In far northern New Mexico, shed hunters will have to avoid the large areas of pri- vate land unless they have written permission, but some areas of public land offer a good shed-hunting possibilities.

If the best, Depart- ment of Game and Fish said, is the Valle Vidal Unit 35 in northern Magdalena. The only catch to hunting sheds in the Valle Vidal Unit is you have to work around closure times for wintering and calv-
Springtime is for birds for Springtime is for birds for

Northern rarities
April is breeding season for one of the state’s rarest migrants, the mountain plover. If you’ve been on the lookout for this bird, you’ll find it at the Bernardo Wildlife Management Area in McKinley County near the Arizona border, or Red Lake off Fort Sumner in De Baca County.

Rio Grande migrant trap
Percha Dam State Park just south of Caballo Dam is well-known as one of New Mexico’s best migrant traps, a place where birders can see a large variety of birds and other wildlife.

northern osprey

Northeastern lakes
Clayton Lake State Park is a well-known destination for birders in springtime. Take the nature trail through the riparian area at the upper end of the lake and look for spring migrants such as yellow-rumped warblers, gray-cheeked and nothern shoveler, and black-necked stilts. Stop along the way to look for least bitterns. Look in the woods surrounding the lake, and watch for migrant shorebirds such as stilts, sandpipers and Wilson’s phalaropes.

Northwestern surprises
El Morro National Monument and the El Malpais National Conservation Area are also worth the drive. The area has a wealth of beauty with sandstone cliffs and canyons and picturesque skys, attracting a variety of birds. Along the drive south of Grants, you will pass through a portion of the El Malpais region and sections of the Cibola National Forest. Western and mountain bluebirds may be found along the road, as well as western tanagers, long-distance migrants from South America.

Society for the Protection of Nature, Doc Warden, a wildlife habitat specialist with the Department of Game and Fish, took this record-book bull in the San Mateo Mountains.

Tijeras Canyon Wildlife Corridor gets FHA award
Tijeras — The Federal Highway Administration has awarded the Tijeras Canyon Wildlife Corridor Program $149,548 (FHWA award 

New Mexico bird database
Birds: Check out this website, http://birdm.

New Mexico birding guide
New Mexico Wildlife Management Areas

Southwestern New Mexico Birding Trail: This free birding guide published by Audubon New Mexico and several community, state and federal agencies aims to help birders and hikers discover the state’s birdlife. It is available for free at the website, www.audubon.org.

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Another 12 feet before reaching its permanent pool level of 4,155 feet elevation, said Jaime Ramires, park manager for the Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the lake and the dam. On a bright note, a new boat ramp should be close to completion by Memorial Day, with 80 parking spots and a day-use area.

Heron, Navajo up again

Heron Lake is expected to be 65 percent full with 250,000 acres-feet and may conclude the summer at 85 percent -- a really good year for sailboaters, anglers and kayakers who favor this quiet, no-wake lake.

The snowpack for the San Juan River basin, which feeds Navajo Lake State Park, was 137 percent of normal in March, compared to last year at 79 percent of normal, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Navajo Lake State Park, will be almost full for Memorial Day with 6,075 feet in elevation and should provide outstanding recreation conditions throughout the summer in both the reservoir and the San Juan River.

Navajo Lake gets deeper rather than as the water levels climb due to its vertical sandstone cliffs. The lake is consistently good for largemouth and smallmouth bass, catfish, northern pike, and the San Juan River is known for its world-class trout fishing. 

“The water releases from the dam are expected to reach 5,000 cubic feet per second from mid-May to the end of July,” said Matt Maness, Department of Game and Fish conservation officer for the Grants area. “Because they are a predatory fish and feed mostly on the goldfish and white suckers, you will want to try and imitate one of those fish by using large wooden minnows and large spoons.”

Feces basing improvement

The Pecos River Basin has significantly lower reservoir expectations this year compared to 2005. By Memorial Day, Summer Lake will be 50 percent full and is expected to drop 40 percent by Labor Day. Brantley Lake, normally 80 percent full in the summer months, is at only 35 percent. The lake is at a depth of 16,000 acres-feet, swell by July 4 to 25,000 acres-feet and drop again to 15,000 acres-feet by the end of the summer. Although these might trigger some reservations for summer recreation, state fisheries officials have not identified any serious issues with the lake levels since 2002, the fishery has rebounded.

“Santa Rosa has some really big crappie – not large numbers, but big fish,” Denny said. “Vallely, smallmouth and largemouth bass also will be good. Summer has mostly wakeless – it will be good through Memorial Day and then slow down as it gets warmer.”

Brantley suffers from golden algae blooms, which are toxic to fish. Because elevated levels of the banned pesticide DDT have been found in walleye and channel catfish, the species currently is under a regulatory ban for sport fish needs and endangered species needs, such as the Pecos bluntsnout shiner.

“We try to issue the block releases before the full-sprint in the spring so we don’t leave them in dry pools and keep a constant pressure in those stretches of the river needed for the bluntsnout shiner,” Castell said. “But it does come to a transition between sport fish and getting the crop to market, so it’s going to a market.”

Maloya, Clayton promoting

Some of New Mexico State Parks’ smaller lakes are not on the “main drag” of the larger watershed-related resources, they are fed by creeks, underground springs and smaller rivers and often designed for purposes other than recreation.

Clayton Lake does not release water for irrigation, according to Park Superintendent Charles Niman. In March it measured 2,000 acres-feet and 5,104 feet in elevation – about 67 percent of normal. By Memorial Day with 80 parking spots and a day-use area. 

“Our outlook for the season is very good,” Niman said. “We have had a good winter, which has led into a really good season and we also had a really good spring. 

“The lake is at a really good level and we certainly expect to have a really good season.”

Heron Lake State Park’s no-wake restriction make it very popular with kayakers, Canada geese and even pelicans cruise its waters during the winter months.

Mike Castell, supervisor for Lake Sumner Reservoir, said Brantley Lake is kept at a level low during the winter months to minimize water loss through evaporation, and tends to become alkaline as it sits during the winter. In spring, block releases are usually initiated from Lake Sumner to “sweeten the water” in Brantley. The reservoirs in the lower Pecos Basin, which include Santa Rosa, Summer and Brantley lakes, are used primarily for irrigation but water managers also consider sport fish needs and endangered species needs, such as the Pecos bluntsnout shiner.

By Ross Morgan

Hungry tigers lurk in Bluewater, Quemado lakes

Anglers who visit Bluewater and Quemado lakes may tie into a tiger muskie like this one shown by fisheries biologist Rachael Green.

Tiger muskies are a sterile hybrid of white and northern pike that resemble markings on a tiger. About 100,000 tiger muskies have been stocked in Bluewater Lake every year since 2003 to help rid the lake of an infestation of goldfish caused by anglers who dumped bait fish into the lake.

Anglers are not allowed to keep the tiger muskies and must immediately return them to the water after they catch one. The Department of Game and Fish is considering a limited bag limit for the tiger muskie, but for now officials plan to let them continue to grow and become the right size before the sport fish.

The largest Bluewater tiger muskie caught by a Game and Fish employee measured a whopping 56 inches and weighed 40 pounds. It is the state record for Utah.

A tiger muskie lake is killifish, catfish, trout and an occasional white sucker. They prefer colder, deeper waters.

“It’s not uncommon for anglers to tie into 30- to 40-inch tiger muskies,” said Rick Castell, fisheries biologist for the Department of Game and Fish. “If you are interested in heading out to Bluewater or Quemado, they are both accessible to anglers to tie into 30- to 40-inch tiger muskies to deal with an infestation of goldfish caused by anglers who dumped bait fish into the lake.

An infestation of goldfish caused by anglers who dumped bait fish into the lake.

By Ross Morgan

Regional Outlook

Muskie madness

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An infestation of goldfish caused by anglers who dumped bait fish into the lake.
By Mark Madson

Everyone likes fishing for trout. How about hunting for trout? If all else fails, you can try it.

Many New Mexico anglers head to their local lake or river and fish for trout from the bank, using different rigs loaded with corn, salmon eggs, or one of the seemingly endless handfuls of bits of steel, wire, or even a piece of线 or a rubber band on a hook. From these boats to trampolines, lures, or even an old tennis shoe tied to a stake, there are a few anglers who fish for trout instead of those who fish for fish. Water clarity can often determine which method you use, but when you can cast and have a hook on the line or whether you have to make a trip to get them to take your bait or lure. The size of the stream or river also comes into play: Smokey on trout sounds a lot like, doesn’t it.

Some trout fishing opportunities exist along the upper portions of the Rio Grande where brown trout and rainbow trout share the same pool. These are two species of trout that are highly sought after by anglers and are often stocked with hatchery trout. The Rio Grande is one of the most popular trout fishing destinations in New Mexico, with hundreds of miles of water suitable for trout fishing. The Rio Grande is a great place to test your luck for trout, and there are many opportunities for fishing in the area. You can find trout in the Rio Grande by exploring the different sections of the river and looking for signs of fish. However, the water clarity in the river can be variable, so it is important to be aware of this before you go fishing.

Anglers who use the Lance Chavez Fishing Area are urged to remember that they are on private property and that novice fly anglers should have a guide. As a result, a strike is more likely to occur with a fly that is cast into the water and is seen by the trout. Anglers who prefer to fish from the bank will likely find success with a fly that is tied to a leader or a dropper. Anglers who prefer to use a Weighted Leader should have a guide. As a result, a strike is more likely to occur with a fly that is cast into the water and is seen by the trout. Anglers who prefer to use a Weighted Leader should have a guide.
Good spring runoff should improve southwest fishing

By LuAnn Talaya

This year’s below-average spring runoff should improve fishing opportunities in southwestern New Mexico. Here’s a quick forecast and some tips from Casey Harthorn, the Department of Game and Fish warmwater fisheries biologist.

regulations opening selected streams that had previously been closed to fishing. At a Commission meeting, the department authorized the opening of additional streams were opened for fishing. In the coming fishing season, fishing. Anglers may now fish in Black Canyon, Inlet, and Laughlin creeks, and Wheeler and Yellow creeks.

To fish for Gila trout, anglers must obtain a Gila Trout permit. This permit allows the Department to gather information so it can track how many anglers are fishing in these streams, how many fish are being caught, and what their angling experience was like.

There are a few restrictions in these Special Trout Waters:

- Anglers must have a free Gila Trout Permit along with their fishing license.
- Fishermen may only use artificial flies and lures with a single hook. They are not allowed to attach feathers or other artificial means to their flies.

- The season for Black Canyon and Magdalena creeks is July 2-October 31. The other streams are open year-round.

- The bag limits are: Catch-and-release fishing in Black Canyon and Magdalena creeks; two trout of any length in Inlet and Laughlin creeks.

Gila trout streams are stocked with over 250,000 Gila trout from the Mora State Fish Hatchery. N.M. Hatchery Commission biologist Jerry Lozano said, "They typically yield more fish than those that are needed to establish new populations.

These "surplus" fish are available for stocking in the waters that normally receive non-native rainbow trout. Brook fish are spawned only two or three times. After their contribution, brood fish are released at Quemado Lake. In these streams, there are no gear restrictions and the bag limit is 2 trout per day.

Efforts are continuing for expansion of Gila trout throughout their historic homeland. In order for the Gila trout to be completely "delisted," at least 15 self-reproducing populations within 149 miles of streams must exist in the Gila River drainage of Arizona and New Mexico.

By Marii Ninan

A three-carat, “lightning design” diamond bracelet giveaway;

A Diamond Camping Pass with a 25 percent discount on camping;

State Parks Geocaching Challenge with special awards;

Outdoor Classroom Program to get kids into nature.

These are just a few of the highlights of New Mexico State Parks’ 75th Diamond Anniversary celebration in 2008. New Mexico State Parks evolved from a federal New Deal initiative in 1933 to a vibrant system of 34 parks serving more than 4 million people a year.

In 1916, then-Interior Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a proclamation Feb. 1, 2008, honoring former state park directors, lengthen enrollment and retained state park managers.

“The year, let’s dedicate ourselves to protecting and improving state parks for present and future generations,” State Parks Director Dave Simons.

Visitors to all state parks can enter to win a free “lightning design” diamond bracelet, worth about $3000 and featuring approximately three carats in diamond set in 14-karat gold, donated by Butterfield Jewelers. Finalists for the diamond drawing will be chosen every month from each park, with a grand prize winner drawn in late 2008. Register at any state park or office.

In the same month, New Mexico State Parks offer a Diamond Camping Pass in 2008. The pass is a camping coupon booklet for 10 nights of camping. It sells for $75, nearly a $100 value. Campers may purchase the pass at any state park or office.

The State Parks Geocaching Challenge draws campers to each State Park to find the hidden treasure and learn more about parks in the state. Geocaching is an outdoor treasure-hunting game in which participants use Global Positioning System, or GPS units, to track treasures. The caches, which are not buried, are waterproof containers of various types – a high-tech container and possibly some items for trade.

“Participating in a cache hunt is a good way to take advantage of the wonderful features and capability of a GPS unit,” said Wrenne Reynolds of New Mexico Geocaching.

Each state park will have one cache and the coordinates will be announced at each park’s annual meeting. Participants can register for the challenge at any state park. The rules for the challenge can be found at www.wildlifenm.us.

LuAnn Talaya is a Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Southwest Area. She can be reached at the Department’s office in Las Cruces at (575) 532-2168.

Lake Roberts was named in memory of Austin A. Roberts, a Department of Game and Fish pilot who lost his life in the line of duty in 1960.

Lake Roberts: The lake is full of nutrients as it is filled by pumping water directly from the Gila River. It produced the state record largemouth bass and proves to be a great fishing spot, especially in the spring.

Lake Roberts: Fishing for bass and trout should be fair this year.

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The Kids ‘N Parks program is funded by taxpayers’ voluntary contributions on the annual New Mexico Personal Income Tax form. This year, donations will permit State Parks to provide transportation grants to 26 schools in 34 communities across the state. The Friends of Hyde Memorial State Park also raised $2000 for Santa Fe schools to buses to the park for outdoor education.

Special events have long highlighted visitors’ experiences at state parks and 2008 offers some highly diverse opportunities from historical commemorative events such as Oct 3-4 Gila Floods Days to Heron Lake State Park, Gipsey Festival. This year, Ute Lake State Park celebrated the Water, an outdoor-stage concert featuring patriotic country music from Coast and High-energy hanky-tok rockers Confederacao Railroad. Call 888-NAPARKS or visit www.facebook.com for detailed information and a calendar of events.

The year 2008 also marks the 75th anniversary of the federal New Deal program, which included the Civilian Conservation Corps that provided jobs for thousands of unemployed young men working on conservation projects nationwide. The CCC in New Mexico helped build some of the first state parks – including Hyde Memorial/Santa Fe River and Bottomless Lakes – and at other sites that later became state parks, such as Cerrillos Lake and Elephant Butte.

Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park will open a 255-acre property in 2008 as a result of a land swap that also preserved 50 acres of the Carlsbad Hills in the Carlsbad Crush. The Land Trust and Bosque State Parks Foundation has established a 75th Anniversary fund for programs and projects.

With the rising tide of water levels in parks throughout the state, Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park also reopened for the year. Elephant Butte, Cerrillos Hills/Gallop Basin, and Black Mesa State Parks also reopened for the year. The Land Trust and Bosque State Parks Foundation has established a 75th Anniversary fund for programs and projects.

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Students team up to monitor forest health

By Pat Walsh

When science teacher Jo Ahlm took her advanced seventh-graders into a New Mexico State Park to do real-world research, she didn’t know one of her city girls would turn out to be a wizard in the woods.

“She has a sense of direction, working with a compass—it was just natural for her. We must have never had it exposed to her before,” said Ahlm, who teaches at Raton Middle School. “I told her father and brother how good she was in the woods and they were extremely impressed. They said, ‘She’s a city girl.’”

Surprises like these have been among the fringe benefits of a forest monitoring project at Sugaree Canyon State Park near Raton. The project to monitor red and Abert’s squirrels, which has been going on for 10 years, had a creative effort among numerous agencies, including National Parks, Raton Public Schools, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the Cimarron Watershed Alliance and the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program of the U.S. Forest Service.

“This project gives the students hands-on experience on forest health and ecology,” said Park Superintendent Bob Dye.

The students, in turn, benefit by the gathering data that will be the overall resource management. Students become allies in the protection of our natural and cultural resources.

Student Synovia Dunces, 15, of Raton seemed to bolster that by saying that she received more attention to issues at the park since taking part in the project, but added that it is one of her memories? Using a modified trash can, the kids gathered their tools and began.

The idea for student monitoring was launched several years ago by park staff when the City of Raton was putting plans to thin the forest in the park.

The land in the park is owned by Raton and provides a large chunk of the town’s water source. Town officials were concerned that an intense forest fire could contaminate the park’s Lake McAllister, which is a part of the community’s drinking water. The town’s hopes was to thin out the forest and prevent a catastrophic crown fire and keep the lake and prevent a catastrophic crown fire and keep the lake and prevent a catastrophic crown fire and keep the lake and prevent a catastrophic crown fire and keep the lake.

The next step was finding a research fit for the park and the kids. Mammalogist Jennifer Frey had done brief professional monitoring in the park and was interested in squid studies. She agreed to provide a monitoring protocol in which the kids walked transect lines looking for squirrel “sign” - chewed pine cones and red squirrel storage middens - and conducted random habitat surveys.

“Most of the national forests in the Southwest have identified both the red squirrel and Abert’s squirrel as Management Indicator Species – red squirrels for mixed conifer forest and Abert’s squirrel for ponderosa pine forest,” Frey said. “They are required to monitor these species to assess how forest management practices are affecting populations.”

With Frey’s permission, project intern Karen Oldham developed the protocol to make it child-friendly as possible. She also set up several backpacks for student teams, which include a global positioning system, or GPS, unit, a densitometer – a curved mirror used to gauge forest cover - a GPS camera; tape measure; data sheets and a reference binder.

“The densitometer was pretty rough to learn,” said student Devon Encinias. Project funds allowed the purchase of Geographic Information System (GIS) software and a digital camera to digitize the study. Oldham has made some basic computer maps of their data and project leaders hope eventually to involve students in computer mapping.

While the connection between squirrels and good water may not seem obvious, the Cimarron Watershed Alliance’s outgoing executive director Mikal Ilan saw the link.

“I like to look at watershed health from a holistic point of view,” she said. “Riparian, riparian, upland, woodland, and forested areas are all interconnected. Many watershed projects tend to address past management mistakes. An education project like the one at Sugaree gives youth of all ages the proactive tools and understanding to avoid decisions that are detrimental to watershed health.”

Ahlm’s class has visited the park twice a year since the fall of 2006. Ahlm divides her students into six groups of four to five kids, and each group was accompanied by an adult. The adults included State Parks ranger and Department of Game and Fish officer. Officer Scott Draney, Game and Fish habitat specialist for southeastern New Mexico, said his crew of boys quickly adopted names related to their task: “tech dude” for the boy handling the GPS unit and “recording dude” for the boy writing down the data. Draney, dubbed “field guide dude,” said the hands-on approach has value.

“They think they get more out of it because they actually went out and did it,” he said. “Even if one kid out of that whole class decides to go into some career related to biology, it’s probably a win all the way around.”

By Clint Henson and Eric Frey

As the weather finally begins to warm up, it’s time to dust off the fishing gear and head outside. Spring is the best time to land one of the nation’s favorite fish, and you don’t have to drive all the way to Michigan or Wisconsin.

Every year, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conducts a major effort to collect walleye eggs from reservoirs to add the eggs in hatcheries and increase survival. A collection of Department personnel conduct the spawn for both reservoirs and get each egg lot to reach an egg goal of about 15 million.

Walleye normally spawn starting in mid-March and peak in late-March to early April.

Biologists typically collect eggs at the Ute and Conchas Reservoirs, but on occasion collect eggs from the Maxwell Lakes, Santa Rosa Lake and Caballos Reservoir.

Biologists set gill nets overnight to collect female walleye and use electrofishing boats to collect male walleye. The females are removed from the nets, and their eggs are gently squeezed into bowls. “Sperm, or “milt,” is collected from the males and used to fertilize the eggs. The fertilized eggs are gently stirred with a bird feather. Fertilization is a reliable way to keep the eggs from sticking together. Fertilized eggs are then released.

The fertilized eggs are taken to Rock Lake Hatchery in Santa Rosa, where after 10 to 12 days, the eggs hatch and are stocked back into the lakes.

Fishing for walleye is tricky because you have to be fishing specifically for them. You generally won’t catch one while fishing for bass or trout. Walleye are typically found on the bottom of the lakes. They are also typically nocturnal, hence the purpose of their large, round eyes that gather any available light.

The best times to fish for walleye are spring pre-spawns and post-spawns. During the spring, walleye are very active, and they feed regularly to put on weight before and after the spawning season. Anglers have best luck with bottom-bouncing lures tipped with minnows or worms,尊严, big, adding a bit of plastic or live bait.

Department working to bring trout back to troubled McAllister Lake

By Clint Henson

McAllister Lake, a popular fishing spot east of Las Vegas, will remain fishless this year. Large-scale water quality conditions improve so fish can again be stocked.

Low water levels in 2007 allowed harmful algae blooms and oxygen levels to plummet, resulting in a complete die-off of trout. The Department of Game and Fish planned to let the lake dry completely to remove them. However, a bloom of golden algae killed the carp before the lake went dry.

In early March, the lake held 15 percent of its capacity and still had very high salinity – perfect conditions for golden algae, single cell organisms that produce toxins that are extremely toxic to fish. Breeding organisms – especially invertebrates – would starve and massive fish kills in the lower part of the lake. 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Steep thrills

Scenery, solitude await visitors at Colin Neblett Wildlife Area

Photograph: Clint Henson

Hunters and hikers familiar with northern New Mexico agree that one word comes to mind when describing access to the back country of the Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area. “Steep,” says Clint Henson, a Department of Game and Fish conservation officer who patrols and does habitat work in the south side of Cimarron Canyon. “Whether you decide to hike the north or the south side of Cimarron Canyon, it’s a tough climb all the way from the bottom.”

Rigorous access has its benefits. Those willing to huff and puff a bit are rewarded with some of the most spectacular scenery northern New Mexico has to offer. “And one of the neat things about it,” Henson says, “is once you get back in there you won’t see other people. It’s a great opportunity to see wildlife usually there in the canyon bottoms, were animals gather around permanent water sources.

The Colin Neblett area was purchased by the State Game Commission in 1949 to provide hunting and fishing opportunities and to protect wildlife from excessive competition with livestock. It was named after a prominent federal judge and sportman who helped form the first State Game Commission in 1936. The 33,116-acre property is the state’s largest wildlife management area. U.S. 64 runs west to east through the center of the area along the Cimarron River, a popular camping and trout-fishing destination. Elevations range from 7,200 feet in the canyon bottom to 12,045 feet at the summit of Touch-Me-Not Mountain.

Most of the canyon bottom between Eagle Nest Lake and Ute Park is operated as a state park by the New Mexico State Parks Division, which maintains two modern camping areas along the river. Cimarron Canyon State Park’s modest day-use and camping fees give visitors year-round access to clean campsites and restrooms. Hunters and anglers also can find free access to the Cimarron River and Colin Neblett trails from two designated no-fee parking areas.

Fishing is the main attraction along the Cimarron River, which is regularly stocked with rainbow trout and is home to a large population of stream-bred brown trout. Toby Creek and Clear Creek flow into the Cimarron River from the south, and also offer fine fishing opportunities for those willing to walk a bit. Hiking trails flank both creeks. Toby Trail is a steep climb that emerges into large meadows, making it a popular destination for elk hunters. Clear Creek Trail also is steep and takes hikers through dense timber.

Maverick Trail is the only hiking trail on the north side of the canyon. The trail starts at the Maverick Campground just east of the Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area is known for its fabulous trout fishing in the Cimarron River and its spectacular scenery in the high country on both sides of Cimarron Canyon.

Recreation options abound at Wildlife Management Areas

Wildlife watching and other wildlife-related recreation is better than ever in New Mexico this spring with the expansion of the Department of Game and Fish Gaining Access Into Nature (GAIN) program.

Beginning April 1, thousands of acres of State Game Commission and Wildlife Management Areas were officially opened for the first time for activities other than hunting and fishing. Allowed activities in 2018 included non-motorized vehicle use during elk-calving season. Mountain bikers, anglers and other visitors with quality recreation. GAIN participants will pay modest fees for access to the properties, with proceeds going toward wildlife research, habitat improvement, maintenance, development and operations.

“Responsibly opening more wildlife-associated recreation opportunities on state wildlife areas makes sense,” Department Director Bruce Thompson said. “GAIN will allow more people to appreciate the wildlife resources on these areas without interfering with traditional uses such as hunting and fishing. This program also helps a wider array of people to contribute to the costs of administering wildlife and habitat conservation on these important areas.”

GAIN has its roots in the 2004 Governor’s Conference on Wildlife-Associated Recreation, where Governor Bill Richardson recognized New Mexico’s almost $1 billion wildlife and outdoor tourism industry. The program began by offering lottery-style drawings for special opportunities to watch bighorn sheep, bow hunt elk, deep stream electro-fishing, and bighorn sheep and turkey trapping and other special events. This spring’s GAIN expansion dramatically broadens the program dramatically.

Here are some details about GAIN, and where you can find more information:

Areas open to GAIN activities

• Northeast: Pecos River Complex (Bert Clancy, Mora, Tererro and Jamie Koch areas), Chacon Lakes, Colin Neblett, Ellett Barker, McAllister Lake, Rio de los Pinos, Urraca, Wagon Mound.

• Northwest: Bluebird Mesa, Edward Sargent, Jackson Lake, Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex (Bernardo and La Joya), Rio Chama, Water Canyon, William Humphreys.

• Southeast: Bear Canyon, Bill Evans, Hurst Bar, Lake Roberto, Mimbres, Red Rock, Socorro-Encodinda.

• South: Baca, Jasper, Lesser Prairie Chicken, Seven Rivers, Williams Huey, and a new (un-named) area in Roosevelt County.

Hunting and fishing

A current New Mexico hunting or fishing license with a Habitat Management and Access Validation allows holders to hunt or fish on Wildlife Management Areas during seasons for which they are legally licensed.

Camping fees give visitors year-round access to permanent water sources.

Conservation opportunities outside state park boundaries in the Colin Neblett and other state wildlife areas. Annual GAIN permits cost $20, including a Habitat Management and Access Validation. Five-day GAIN permits with a validation are $9. Youths younger than age 18 do not need GAIN permits. Licensed hunters don’t need GAIN permits while they’re in the area during hunting seasons.

A GAIN permit at Colin Neblett will open miles of trails to hikers, horseback riders and photographers. The Clear Creek Trail will be open year-round for hiking only. The Toby and Maverick trails will be open to horseback riding and hiking, but will be closed May 15 through July 31 during elk-calving season. Mountain bikes and motorized vehicles are not allowed on the Colin Neblett at any time.

For more information about the Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area, please contact the Department’s Northeast Area Office in Raton, (505) 445-2311.

License holders do not need a GAIN permit to hunt or fish on a Wildlife Management Area.

Allowed GAIN activities

Activities will vary according to area, and some areas may be closed at times during hunting seasons. This year, the Department of Game and Fish GAIN permit and a Habitat Management and Access Validation to participate in activities on wildlife areas. Youth’s younger than age 18 don’t need permits. Permits are available at license vendors, Department offices in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Raton and Raton, and at www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Annual permits are valid April 1-March 31. Prices, including a $1 vendor fee:

- Statewide Annual Individual GAIN Permit with validation: $20.
- Temporary Individual 5-Day GAIN Permit with validation: $9.

Special opportunity permits

These permits allow participants to be involved in Department-sponsored wildlife tours, bighorn sheep and turkey trapping and relocation efforts, prairie chicken and electro-fishing surveys, and other activities. These special permits are available through a drawing. Visit the Department’s website for more information.

Jamie Koch shelter use permit

Applications for the Jamie Koch Wildlife Area Community Shelter (north of Pecos) are accepted at the Santa Fe office only. Reservations are made on a first-come, first-served basis for up to four consecutive days. The cost is $25 a day. For reservations, call (505) 476-8101.

Commercial use permits

A commercial permit is required for any activity conducted on any Wildlife Management Area for which a fee is charged. Exceptions are hunting activities conducted by Department-registered outfitters. No commercial activity is allowed until the applicant obtains approval of a completed application from the Department. Please visit the Department’s website for rules and fees for Commercial Use Permits.

License holders do not need a GAIN permit to hunt or fish on a Wildlife Management Area.

Permits and fees

Everyone age 18 or older must purchase a GAIN permit and a Habitat Management and Access Validation to participate in activities on wildlife areas. Youth’s younger than age 18 don’t need permits. Permits are available at license vendors, Department offices in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Raton and Raton, and at www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Annual permits are valid April 1-March 31. Prices, including a $1 vendor fee:

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